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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the position that standardized evaluation formats and procedures for multi-national development programs are not only desirable but possible in diverse settings. The key is the localization of standard systems, which involves not only the technical manipulation of items and scales, but also the contextual interpretation of findings by local stakeholders. Localization of standardized formats is illustrated via the case of Foster Parents Plan International, a child-sponsorship and community development organization with program activities in over 80 locations in 26 countries with a target population of over 500,000 families. Program activities are aimed primarily at the health, education, and resource (livelihood) sectors. The Field Office Evaluation System (FOES) measures baseline status for planning purposes, progress toward goals, and impact of activities on participating families. Operational goals include access to potable water, vaccination coverage, nutritional status, sanitation and waste disposal, housing, formal education, literacy, and income. These indicators constitute the core of the organization's development goals and activities. The FOES was designed to provide longitudinal information for affiliated target populations, the board of directors, and local, regional, and international management. Localization methodology for the 158-item FOES instrument, which is administered at 3-year intervals to a random sample of 400 household heads, is covered in detail. (TJH)

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STANDARDIZED EVALUATION FOR MULTI-NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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STANDARDIZED EVALUATION FOR MULTI-NATIONAL PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Development organizations, foundations and other international service agencies are increasingly involved in program activities across a variety of cultural settings and national environments. Most organizations have developed either explicit or implicit goals for program activities, and require that these be measured in order to address such organizational issues as program effectiveness and accountability. The need to evaluate activities in diverse settings raises questions of the viability of the use of standard formats and procedures.

This paper takes the position that standardized evaluation formats and procedures are not only desirable but possible in diverse settings. The responsibility for appropriate use of standard formats is jointly that of the evaluator and local stakeholders. The key is the localization of standard systems which involves not only the technical manipulation of items and scales, but the contextual interpretation of findings by local stakeholders.

Localization of standardized formats is illustrated by the case of Foster Parents Plan International, a child-sponsorship and community development organization with program activities in over 80 locations in 26 countries.

INTRODUCTION

Foster Parents Plan International (PLAN) has evolved over its fifty years of existence from an international relief and welfare organization to a child-sponsorship, community development organization. It is currently engaged in a variety of program activities in over 80 locations in 26 countries, and has a target population of over 500,000 affiliated families. Since PLAN works mainly with a community development model, the total number of families directly and indirectly affected by PLAN activities is probably between 3 and 4 million.

Program activities are aimed primarily at the health, education and resource (livelihood) sectors. The organization has developed corporate goals in these three sectors and requires that program planning and project activities be directed towards their accomplishment.

Any organization operating in so many diverse environments needs to assess its progress towards goals in a systematic manner in order to measure its own performance and to meet accountability issues.

PLAN has designed and implemented a standardized evaluation system to measure:

- a. baseline status for planning purposes;
- b. progress towards goals; and,
- c. the impact of activities on participating families.

This system has been designed to provide comparable information on organizational performance in various cultural and national settings. There are two main reasons for a standardized approach: management information requirements and practicality.

1. Management information requires that data be comparable in order to assess progress and organizational performance in a variety of settings.
2. For practical reasons, designing and implementing unique evaluation formats, items and procedures for 80-plus locations (and their own sub-locations) is neither possible nor cost-effective. While it is recognized that each location or sub-location does indeed have its special features and characteristics, it is more fruitful to concentrate on similarities rather than differences.

MEASURING ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

It is important to recognize that the focus of evaluation is on one common element: organizational performance both at the local and organizational levels. We are not measuring the diversity of individuals or societies, but rather the performance of organizational activities toward goals in the context of a multiplicity of settings. In addition, organizational policy imposes certain minimum conditions on the selection of the target population.¹ Similarities in the target populations provide the basis for

¹Basic policy for affiliation ensures that certain characteristics such as level of income, school-age children, residential stability are essentially similar in all field offices.

both global goal establishment and standardized evaluation formats and procedures.

PLAN corporate goals have been defined at a relatively high level of generality. They reflect commonly held values and concepts about the qualities of Development. To measure progress towards goal achievement, eight Organizational Performance Indicators (OPIs) have been identified. They are empirically measurable and can be operationalized across cultural and national boundaries. The OPIs are:

1. Access to potable water
2. Vaccination coverage
3. Nutritional status
4. Sanitation and waste disposal
5. Housing
6. Formal education
7. Literacy
8. Income

These indicators are consonant with most national and inter-national development indicators and policies. **The main point is that the indicators have direct relevance to the organization's development goals and activities; they constitute the core of the organization's development activities.**

STAKEHOLDERS

The Field Office Evaluation System (FOES) was designed to provide meaningful and useful objective information to two basic types of stakeholders. These have been identified as:

Level I

Affiliated population and their communities

Local management and staff

Level II

Regional and International management

Board of Directors

Level I stakeholders are the people who make operational decisions regarding program planning and activities. They need to know the status of the target population with respect to the organizational indicators in order to design and implement programs directed towards organizational goals. In addition, they need evaluation feedback in order to monitor the effectiveness of their work and progress towards their stated goals.

Level II stakeholders, international and regional management, needs to have information relating to the overall progress of activities and impact on a standardized and comparative basis. Their decisions reflect policy and budgetary concerns.

METHODOLOGY

The Field Office Evaluation Systems (FOES) instrument is designed to obtain longitudinal data on the target population at time intervals of three years.² The survey instrument³ itself is based on the Organizational Performance Indicators, and includes 158 items that have a high degree of face validity with respect to the conceptual domains defined in the OPIs. All but two items are observational or behavioral. That is, we are looking at accomplished behavior rather than "intention to behave" or "attitude towards". This is consistent with the evaluation of program activities dealing with concrete and measurable outcomes. More complete investigation into why some particular program activity did or did not produce results is the responsibility of the local field offices, and this indeed will have to address locality specific issues.

The evaluation instrument usually is administered to a random sample of 400 household heads or their partners.⁴ Basic analysis is conducted by the staff of the local field office.

²The three year interval corresponds to the field office budgeting cycle. It is also estimated that a smaller interval would not be sufficient to provide a "fair test" of the results of project activities

³The system has three sources of information: the survey, key informant interviews, and secondary source material.

⁴In order to compensate for extreme cultural or environmental diversity in some field offices, sample size can be adjusted in order to be sure that no specific enclave is under-represented.

ADJUSTMENTS FOR VARIED NATIONAL AND CULTURAL SETTINGS

The first test of the FOES was conducted in three countries in South America. At first glance, this may seem to imply greater homogeneity than is actually the case. In fact, the field offices chosen reflect considerable heterogeneity with respect to language (Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara), environment (urban slums and highly dispersed rural hamlets), and ecological zones (highland, valley and coastal). Results from these field offices indicate that the items and measures do provide comparable data within and between sites.⁵ Measures and items discriminated well along such dimensions as housing, water and wealth measures. And, local staff reported no trouble in using standardized items and definitions of terms. While the results from South America are satisfying, it is recognized that even given the heterogeneity of the seven offices, the selected sites are probably more similar to each other than to other localities in South Asia, East and West Africa or Southeast Asia.⁶

LOCALIZATION -- THE KEY TO STANDARDIZATION

Localization is the procedure by which a standardized instrument is adjusted to the local socio-cultural setting without undermining its theoretical and methodological bases. Localization seeks to ensure the contextual validity and replicability of the instrument and hence the findings in various settings. Localization involves two main processes: technical and interpretive.

⁵Unpublished PLAN data from seven South American countries, 1988.

⁶The system will be extended to South Asia and selected countries in East and West Africa in the current year.

Technical Localization

Localization of the survey instrument is usually a relatively brief process by which item equivalents are developed. For some items, such as immunization, nutrition status, education, and so on, little or no localization is necessary. International and national standards exist against which findings can be compared and analyzed. For other items such as house construction, household possessions/wealth indices, water resources, and income sources, localization is required.

The evaluator's role is of critical importance in the localization process. Paramount is the preservation of the underlying structure of scaled variables. In order to fully exploit the information obtained for evaluation purposes, comparable data are necessary. Thus, a score of 12 on the housing scale, for example, should mean basically the same thing in South America as it does in India, just as prevalence of 0-5 undernutrition should mean the same thing in different settings. Similarly, income or wealth measures are converted from local currency to dollars for standard analysis.

It makes very little difference, for example, what noun is attached to a scale value of "1" for roof type. The important issue is that the roof material assigned a scale value of "1" in India, say, is the equivalent of the scale value of "1" in Colombia, Kenya or Indonesia. Similarly, when variables are given weights to represent economic value (e.g. a simple bed equals a weight of 1 while a spring bed equals

3), the items substituted must be comparable, so that a summed scale score of "22" in one locality is basically equivalent to a "22" in another.

Obviously, this requires that the evaluator fully understand the underlying dimensions of the scales employed. The housing scale used in the FOES, for example, is based on three main conceptual domains: economic value, hygiene, and, as applicable, structural soundness. The scale runs from 0-4 for all elements: roof, walls, and floor. These are universal characteristics of housing. The materials used to create these elements have local equivalents which are relatively equal across cultural and national boundaries, and which can be inserted into the scale for measurement and comparison purposes.

Interpretive Localization

Maintaining the standardization and the integrity of the instrument is only part of the localization process. Level I stakeholders, the beneficiary communities and local staff and management play an important role in localization. This is in the interpretation phase of the evaluation effort.

Statistical data, however valid methodologically, are relatively useless without interpretation. Analysis of data must be placed in context for it to be meaningful and relevant. Operational scales and indicators require contextual understanding and explanation in order to design appropriate strategies and activities for the future.

PLAN has taken a major step in this regard. In all seven offices tested in South America, data produced by the system was presented to and discussed with community members by local staff. The product of these discussions is the development of priorities and a plan of action at the community level. Community members, with the assistance of PLAN staff, have been able to place the indicators measured in the context of their own environment and develop strategies to deal with problems which they identify. Localization, then, is not only the technical issue of managing scales and items in different settings, but the involvement of local "experts", i.e. the primary stakeholders themselves, in the process of interpretation of standard indicators and design of future activities.

SUMMARY

This paper has examined the use of a standardized evaluation system in multiple settings. Organizations have a need for standard information regarding their performance in order to assess their progress towards goals and objectives and for reasons of accountability. Local conditions require that standard instruments be adapted to the environment. These conflicting demands can be mitigated through a process of **localization** that focuses on two main factors: technical and interpretive.

Technical localization ensures the maintenance of the standard formats through explicit definitions of underlying scales and items and the search for local equivalents.

Interpretive localization ensures that once standard data are obtained, they are interpreted in the context of the field setting and lead to locally relevant planning and project activities.

As a consequence of these two localization procedures, both levels of stakeholders, organizational management and local beneficiaries and staff, have access to the kinds of information which permit them to fulfill their roles and responsibilities in the development process.